

GLOBAL CRIME SYNDICATES PROFIT FROM A NEW CONTRABAND

# BLACK MARKET

INSIDE THE ENDANGERED SPECIES TRADE IN ASIA

Ben Davies



*Introduction By Jane Goodall*

*Produced by Adam Oswell / Main photography by Patrick Brown*



EARTH AWARE EDITIONS

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# ANCIENT HISTORY

High up on the precipitous sandstone cliffs of Pha Taem in northeast Thailand, a succession of prehistoric paintings extends around the hillside. The ochre paintings, which date back some 2,000 to 4,000 years, depict human figures as well as giant catfish, elephants, turtles, and primitive-looking animal traps. Drawn with animal blood and mixed with vegetable gum and local soil, they are believed by archaeologists to be among the oldest cave paintings in the region as well as some of the first to show hunter-gatherers at work.

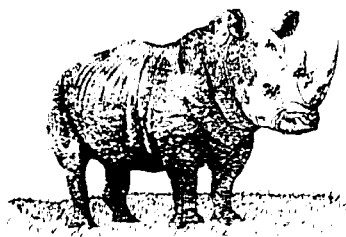
For thousands of years, man has hunted and traded wild animals for food, for profit, and for pleasure. In 100 B.C., a Greek physician is said to have transported a plum-breasted parrot from India to reach his Greek. The physician's keen interest in wildlife was shared by other Europeans. Alexander the Great reportedly sent an Indian elephant to his old tutor Aristotle, whose fascination with the anatomy of animals can be gauged by his composition of nearly fifty volumes on zoology. By 21 B.C., large numbers of tigers, tortoises, and even a python had been shipped to the island of Samos, where they were received by the Emperor Augustus.

The great birds and mammals of Asia were prized as more than just scientific specimens to be wheeled out in public on special occasions. So enamored with white elephants was King Narai of Siam that he honored them with splendid, honorous names, and lavished every form of luxury upon them, from special attendants who burned incense to sweeten the air to musicians who played soothing music to help them sleep. When Fernao Mendes Pinto, a Portuguese adventurer visited Ayutthaya in 1545, he observed a white elephant being taken down to bathe in the river, shaded from the sun by twenty-four servants carrying white parasols and guarded by 3,000 armed men.

If early hunting methods were primitive, relying on traps, clubs, and spears tipped with bone, later generations soon perfected their skills. Akbar the Great, the legendary Mogul emperor kept 1,000 trained cheetahs with which to hunt antelope. On one notable occasion, he surrounded an area of sixty square miles with 10,000 soldiers and spent the next two months hunting game with only a sword, a bow and arrow, and a spear. His successor Jehangir was even more prolific and distinguished himself by killing a total of 889 wild buffalo in addition to many other types of wildlife.

By the thirteenth century, the trade in wildlife in Asia was already well established. When the Chinese emissary Chou Ta-Kuan visited Cambodia in 1297, he observed a thriving market in tigers,

rhinos, and elephants. He reported that the rhinos were used for their horns, which were highly valued in the East for their medicinal properties. The rhinos were also used for their hides, which were used for making armor and shields. The elephants were used for their ivory, which was highly valued in the West for making carvings and ornaments. The tigers were used for their skins, which were used for making coats and hats. The rhinos, elephants, and tigers were all hunted and traded in large numbers in Cambodia at that time.





The Maharaja  
Nepal  
Early 1900's

ABOVE  
*Shumshere, King of Nepal,  
poses on the massive head of an  
Indian one horned rhinoceros.*

PREVIOUS PAGE  
*The Maharaja Shumshere, King  
of Nepal, displays the total kill  
for one hunting season.*

"Hunting is a glorious  
sort of vice working  
its narcotic with all  
the efficacy of the  
ubiquitous poppy."

—Colonel Charles  
Askins, *Asian Jungle—  
African Bush*, 1909

panthers, bears, wild boars, stags, and gibbons. "The most sought-after products are the feathers of the kingfisher, elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns, and beeswax," he wrote in his celebrated account *Customs of Cambodia*, which was first published in 1312. According to Chou, who spent a year in the country, light-colored and veined rhinoceros horns were especially highly regarded together with tusks from an elephant freshly killed by spears.

Part of the reason for the popularity of rhino horn was its use in the making of ceremonial goblets. The Chinese believed that if poison was placed in a goblet made from the horn of a male rhino, the liquid would magically froth. Such was the level of treachery in the early kingdoms of China that these beautifully carved goblets became an indispensable item for use in oath-taking ceremonies. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, China boasted an imperial workshop in which 150 craftsmen did nothing else but make objects from rhino horn and ivory.

There was, however, another reason for this animal's widespread popularity. The male rhino's sexual proclivities were legendary. Mating could last for anything from twenty minutes to several hours and be repeated several times a day. The secret to these exertions was believed to lie in the rhino horn, which weighed up to a kilogram and was made from densely matted rough hair. As a result, powdered rhino horn became known in some circles as the ultimate aphrodisiac, a belief that has since been widely disproved.

Other healing properties were also ascribed to the rhino. Chinese pharmacists commonly recommended the use of rhino horn and hooves as a remedy for leprosy, snakebites, and venereal diseases. Rhino urine was consumed as a cure for asthma and the oil from rhino skin for bellyache and deafness. "It is generally known that the hunting of rhino is very much stimulated by the great value attributed to almost all parts of the rhino's body," noted a Dutch author at the beginning of the twentieth century. One of the most miraculous claims came from India. Pregnant women were advised that they could alleviate birth pangs by placing a rhino horn under the bed. As a result, rhino horns would commonly be rented out to expectant mothers.

Meanwhile, the fame of the strange looking rhinoceros had already spread further afield. In the early sixteenth century, the emperor of Cambay, one of the many states in India, presented the Portuguese King Emmanuel with a great one-horned rhino as a gift. Wanting to test this strange animal's strength, the king put it in a ring with an elephant. The elephant fled the moment that it spotted the one-horned creature. The king was delighted by the novelty of the rhino and decided to present it to Pope Leo X. The ship carrying the rhino, however, was hit by a storm and capsized. 🐘

# KILLING EPIDEMIC

The Oxford English dictionary has a definition for the verb "plunder": "To rob; to obtain booty by force; to seize valuable goods; to steal; or to loot. Few words in the English language sum up so well the situation in Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It must have been extraordinary to see ships piled high with tamed elephants, tigers, buffalo, birds of paradise, and deer skins sailing across the great oceans to China, Japan, and the Indian states around the Bay of Bengal. In gigantic holding pens on the quayside at Aceh as many as twenty elephants at a time were crowded together, awaiting transport to far-off continents like lambs to the slaughter.

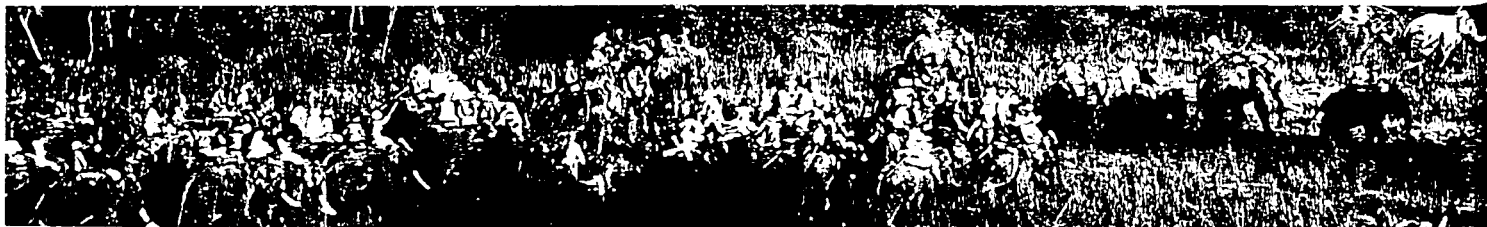
Such was the scale of the plunder that special ships had to be built to accommodate the animals freshly plucked from the jungles of Asia. If the conditions of slave boats are anything to go by, their plight must have been horrific. Cramped into tiny spaces and chained at the feet, the stench of urine and feces would have filled the vessel with unutterable squall. Many of the animals died on these long desolate voyages, addled by diseases. Some escaped their manacles and fell overboard. Of the animals that left port, barely 60 percent survived the journey. But the enormous profits more than made up for these short-term mishaps.

The industrial age of colonization upped the ante as never before. In the name of progress, Asian countries were stripped of their economic wealth on a scale that defies imagination. Once mighty tracts of rainforest were torn down to build railways and bridges. In their place, the great torchbearers of civilization left behind a bleached and denuded landscape.

Between 1875 and 1925, at least 80,000 tigers were killed in India alone—a feat so catastrophic that it recalled the great buffalo killings of North America in which an entire species was virtually wiped out in little more than three decades. In this case, however, the slaughter took place after the British colonial masters declared the tiger a pest and offered bounties for its head. Other types of wildlife, including at least 150,000 leopards, were also indiscriminately shot as Indian princes, British officers, and civil servants rampaged through the forests. It was as if wildlife had been reduced to a commodity, mercilessly hunted for money or for pleasure.

Nepal  
Early 1900s

*Royal hunting party rallies  
on elephant back*



RIGHT  
Nepal  
Early 1900s

*The results of a royal hunt.*



The scale of the killing was all the more terrifying given the special reverence that Indians held for any life-form—a concept known as *ahimsa*, meaning the avoidance of harm. Elephants were venerated as symbols of Ganesh, the Hindu god of wisdom. Tigers were worshipped as guardians of the jungle, credited with mystical powers and believed to sprout wings in order to travel vast distances.

Religious beliefs and superstitions, however, did little to save the animals of the Indian subcontinent. In a small studio in Kathimandu owned by Kiran Manchitrakar, the grandson of one of Nepal's most famous court photographers, there is a black-and-white photograph of that era. It shows an austere-looking man lined up against a backdrop of around 180 tiger, leopard, and crocodile skins. The photograph is faded, the picture of a bygone era. But the formal attire, the stiff collars and top hats, give the appearance more of a pheasant shoot on an English summer's day than of a gigantic culling of some of the world's rarest species of wildlife. The man in the photo is the Maharaja Shumshere, the King of Nepal and the display of animals and skins, the total kill for one season.

To ensure that he wasted no time in pursuit of his prey, the Maharaja would commonly send out seven or eight groups of *shikaris*, or seasoned beaters, to scour the forest-clad foothills in search of tiger tracks. Once a tiger or a rhino had been spotted, members of the shooting party mounted on up to 200 elephants would encircle the animal. As the cornered beast charged the solid wall of elephants, the Maharaja and his favored guests would spring forward and dispatch it with a blast of the rifle.

The relish with which the maharajas went about hunting in this remote corner of the Himalayas was also shared by British royals. In 1911, Queen Elizabeth's grandfather, King George V visited Nepal, where he and a large entourage spent three days hunting in the jungle. King George reportedly shot one of eighteen rhinos as well as several tigers. Ten years later, the Prince of Wales also joined the Maharaja Joodha Shumshere on one of his infamous shoots. So close is the historical relationship between the two countries that when Queen Elizabeth II visited Nepal in 1961, she was presented with a 2.5-meter tusk that was intricately carved by one of the country's most famous family artisans. 🐘

# THE HUNTERS OF ASSAM

On a moonlit night in January, Mohammed Khaleque and Mohammed Faizul leave the village of Kokowary, a sprawling settlement of tumbledown houses and festering sewers situated in the poverty-stricken plains of Assam in northeast India. Following a dirt track that leads towards the distant foothills, they make their way through the now deserted countryside to Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary, home to seventy-five greater Asian one-horned rhinos.

In the shadowy grasslands on the fringes of the park, they are joined by a group of unemployed laborers from a neighboring village. The men work quietly, but with fierce concentration, always on the lookout for any sign of the park rangers who conduct night patrols and who shoot to kill. One of the villagers unwinds a coil of wire, which he attaches to the overhead power supply that runs along the park boundary. Supporting the wire on bamboo sticks, he strings it for almost a kilometer to an area the rhinos are known to frequent.

Rhinos are creatures of habit. Their eyesight is poor, but their sense of smell and hearing is acute. So the men wait downwind in silence. Finally, out of the darkness they glimpse the outline of a rhino lumbering down the trail toward them. Within seconds of touching the wire, the rhino is dead—electrocuted by 11 kilowatts, its head ripped asunder. For the poachers, however, the episode also ends in tragedy. Two of the men touch the cable in error and die instantly. The others flee into the night but not before hacking off the valuable rhino horn with a hatchet.

Here, on the heavily populated plains of Assam, where informers are paid money to report such incidents, word of the killing travels fast. A day later, police from the Mayong district raid the village of Kokowary. They discover the rhino horn hidden in the back of a house. Two men are arrested on charges of assisting the poachers, and three others escape to neighboring states.

The underground channels, however, lead far beyond the poor villagers of Kokowary, who struggle to feed their families in whatever way they can. The real trade is darker, more invisible—extending its grasp with ruthless efficiency from the poachers to corrupt police and government officials and eventually via countless middlemen to the international smugglers who transport the rhino horns to their final destination.

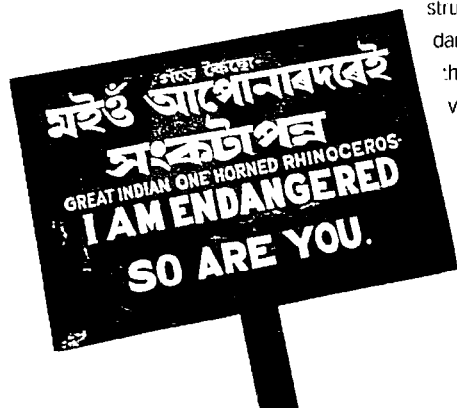
Demand is the insidious force that drives the international

Kaziranga National Park  
Assam, India  
May, 2003

RIGHT AND BELOW  
*Rangers patrolling on elephant.*

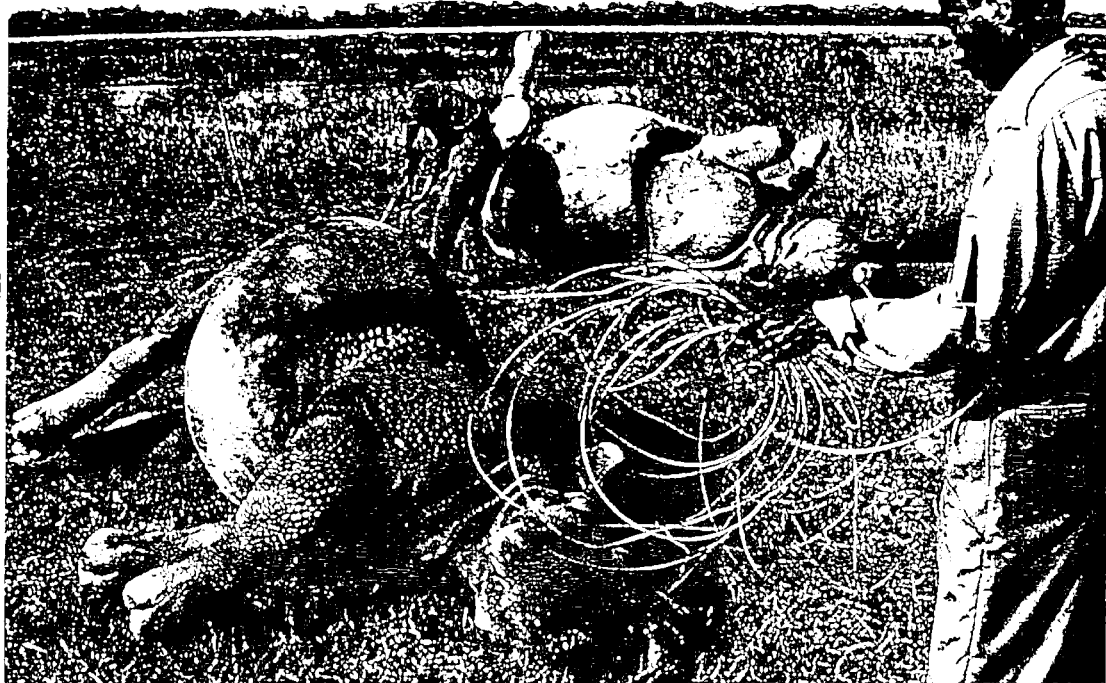


*Specially designed shotgun shells that are made to kill rhinos. In this case they are not being used to kill the rhino for its horn, but to protect the rangers from a charging rhino.*









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**Pabitora Wildlife  
Sanctuary  
Assam, India  
2003**

*A pair of great Asian  
one horned rhinoceroses  
lie dead—electrocuted  
by poachers*

trafficking of rhino horn. And with fewer than 3,000 Asian rhinos left in Southeast Asia, demand is at record highs. Since 1987 more than 600 rhinos have been shot, electrocuted, or poisoned in and around Assam's wildlife sanctuaries, despite the presence of some of the most dedicated rangers in the country. On the international black market, the rhino horns alone would fetch US \$15 million. Local rangers joke that it's like guarding the crown jewels. In this case, however, the rhinos are uninsured, while the men who protect them are grossly underfunded and often outgunned.

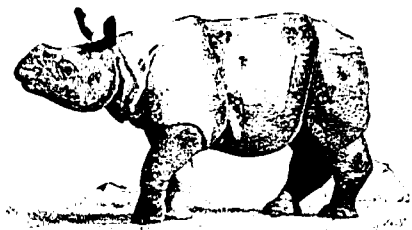
Less than five kilometers as the crow flies from Kokowary, Mrigen Barua is on the radio, checking his outposts in Pabitora. A veteran ranger, he has spent the past twenty years battling to preserve one of the few remaining strongholds of the Asian rhino. His efforts very nearly cost him his life. The first time that poachers tried to kill him was in August 1998 when Mrigen was conducting a night patrol accompanied by three forest rangers. A group of men opened fire, sending the rangers scrambling for cover. In the subsequent shoot-out, one of the poachers was injured, but Mrigen escaped unscathed. On a second occasion in February 1999, a bullet smashed through the open window of Mrigen's vehicle as he was driving through the wildlife sanctuary, missing him by inches. "They tried to eliminate me because I was clamping down too heavily on poachers," he says, his voice trailing off into silence.

Staring out over the marshlands of Pabitora, now filled with crimson water lilies, spotted pond turtles and a profusion of waterfowl, it is hard to imagine that such events ever occurred. Cries of migratory birds fill the air as a fish-eating eagle swoops down on his prey, darting through the lush vegetation. A water monitor, the second largest lizard in the world, slithers through the glistening mud. In the distance, a herd of rhinos graze undisturbed in the late afternoon light.

Against all the odds, however, this stocky man with his neatly trimmed moustache and indomitable passion for wildlife, has successfully turned the tide at Pabitora. Over a five-year period, Mrigen has arrested dozens of poachers including Ab



Park rangers are the first to admit that until poverty is eradicated in the region or until the demand for wildlife is stamped out, the battle to save wildlife can never be won.



Mai Sai/Tachilek  
Thailand, Burma  
September, 2003

*In the Thai-Burma border town of Thachilek, a Asian rhino horn is put on display, the asking price is 8,000 USD. Tachilek is a major outlet and transit point for wildlife products.*

dul Kalam, believed to be one of the local masterminds behind the rhino killings. He has also confiscated large numbers of guns and ammunition. And with the assistance of Pradeep Nath, an incorruptible local police officer, he literally drove the poachers away.

It's a remarkable achievement, all the more so for the limited resources that park rangers have at their disposal and the disproportionate risks that these men take in the line of duty. It is also proof that close cooperation between rangers, conservationists and local communities can provide a real and lasting solution.

In neighboring Kaziranga National Park, home to the largest population of Asian rhinos in the world, similar collaboration has also yielded spectacular results. From rampant poaching in the early 1990s, the number of rhinos killed every year has fallen to a handful, thanks to rigorous enforcement, the use of paid informers, and the start up of a number of locally and internationally funded community projects. In the nearby towns and villages, families who once relied on illegal hunting for their income now sell fresh produce in local markets. The State Forestry Department has invested in new irrigation schemes. As many as 600 visitors now arrive in Kaziranga every day providing employment and a renewable source of income for the local people.

Success, however, has come at a price. Hunters who once targeted Pabitora and Kaziranga are looking further afield to other wildlife sanctuaries where rangers are not armed and where the risks of confrontation are lower. In the wildlife sanctuary of Manas, which straddles the India-Bhutan border, only a handful of rhinos remain out of a total of ninety-seven recorded less than a decade ago. Meanwhile, in Laokhawa Wildlife Sanctuary, a park that once boasted almost 5 percent of the world's rhino population, not one remains.

For Mrigen Barua and Pradeep Nath, who helped turn around the situation in Pabitora, there is also a sad ending. In late 2002 both men were transferred from their posts despite their unblemished record. Local officials claimed that it was a regular transfer, one of many carried out every year in Indian wildlife sanctuaries. But their removal was followed by a noticeable increase in poaching activities in the region.

Several months later, a far greater tragedy occurred. Nilom Bora, a courageous young wildlife conservationist who was instrumental in setting up a network of informers around the wildlife parks in Assam, was stabbed to death. His body was found lying on the side of the road, close to where he had been carrying out an undercover surveillance operation. He had suffered countless knife wounds to the head and chest, and had been dead for at least thirty-six hours when his body was recovered. Despite ongoing police investigations, his killers have not been apprehended. Nilom was just thirty years old when he died, the latest casualty of the war against poachers. ♣



Chitwan National Park  
Sauraha, Nepal  
January, 2004

*A small group of Royal  
Nepalese soldiers patrolling on  
elephant at daybreak.*



The vendors also take orders for rarer species such as hornbills and falcons, kept out of sight to avoid unwelcome inquiries. Smuggled over the border by the thousand from the town of Patna in northwest India, the birds are often flown via Hong Kong to Pakistan. There collectors snap them up or mix them in with non-endangered bird species, then send them to Europe.

In Kathmandu's closely-knit underground network, the channels for wildlife operate largely by word of mouth. Bouchon, a friendly Nepali in his late thirties, works in an antique shop situated close to the Boudhanath Stupa, one of the city's most revered and ancient shrines. He sells finely woven carpets, authentic Tibetan furniture, and Himalayan tribal art. He also acts as a conduit for less legal types of business. Asked if he knows where to buy chests covered in tiger skin, Bouchon initially shrugs his shoulders and denies any knowledge. But after an hour of gentle coaxing, he admits that he has a friend who may be of assistance.

Two phone calls later a Tibetan trader built like a colossus leads the way down a narrow alleyway to an unmarked garage, its door firmly bolted with a brand new padlock. Inside the dimly lit garage, an Aladdin's cave of wildlife items is stacked up to the ceiling: wooden chests covered with tiger skin; antique boxes wrapped in leopard skin; pieces of finely carved furniture cloaked in snow leopard skin. Prices start at just US \$1,000 apiece, with a special discount for bulk orders. And transport is not a problem. To conceal the skins from the prying eyes of customs officials, leather is

sewn around the boxes prior to shipment. "No one will ever know what is inside," says Bouchon. And so far none of his clients have been stopped.

Bouchon's excellent contacts in the export business also ensure that there will be no difficulty setting the chests out of Tribhuvan Airport, Nepal's only international airport and the most common exit point for wildlife sent illegally to Europe, the Middle East, and other Asian markets. Most customs officials can't tell the difference between an endangered animal and a legal export, says Bouchon. Those that can are generally persuaded to look the other way.

Like the illegal trafficking of "blood diamonds" in Angola or the black market trade in timber and narcotics in Burma, it is political conflict that has helped fuel the dizzy rise of wildlife trafficking here in Nepal. In the remote western part of the country, Maoist rebels battling for a communist republic are



**Chitwan National Park  
January, 2004**

*At the Bharatpur barracks a group of Royal Forestry Department Officers display seized tiger and snow leopard skins. The stockpile is five years old and the value is an estimated US \$750,000.*

blamed for a spate of rhino killings that have shocked this country, which is already hardened by years of war. In a matter of weeks, twenty rhinos were killed and their horns probably bartered for weapons on the Chinese border.

For those men who are caught, there is little mercy. In the town of Kasara, on the southern fringes of the Royal Chitwan National Park, there is a military jail used to temporarily lock up poachers. It's dark and dingy and reeks of human excrement. Half a dozen men believed to be part of a local poaching gang are held under guard behind barbed wire fences. Unwashed and frightened-looking, they were picked up two weeks earlier during one of the regular night patrols. But they have not yet

been formally charged with poaching offenses and they were not found in possession of wildlife.

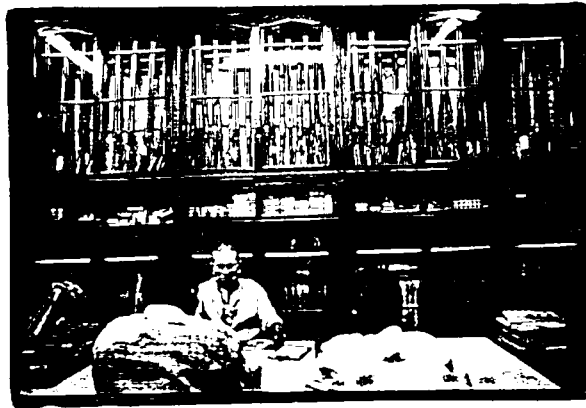
The web of intrigue that surrounds the wildlife trade in Nepal extends far beyond the armed rebels, international traffickers, and small-time poachers that flourish in this increasingly lawless kingdom. Back in 1992, a young reporter by the name of Mangal Man Shakya was working on a story about the rhino trade when he came across a stunning discovery. A trust operated by the Nepalese Royal family was giving pairs of live rhinos to zoos in various foreign countries in exchange for US \$250,000 donations. The money was placed in a numbered bank account at Grindlays Bank (now Standard

Chartered Bank) and not even the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation knew of its existence. Questions remain about whether the money was a gift or a cover up for a major incident of wildlife trafficking and about why nobody outside the trust appeared to be aware of the payment.

On a Sunday afternoon in March, Shakya is seated in one of the many teahouses scattered around the Thamel district of Kathmandu. A reporter turned wildlife investigator, this generous and warm-hearted man has done much to bring the plight of the country's wildlife to the attention of both the government and conservationists. On one of his most recent trips, Shakya spent thirty days on the Tibetan border as part of a team sent in to track down hunters of the rare Tibetan antelope. Since then Shakya, who is now chairman of the Wildlife Watch

Group, has traveled all around the region in a bid to pressure governments to take action to stem the trade. "How is it that the trade is so large and the response so small?" he says without so much as a note of bitterness in his voice.

Few Nepalese believe that the situation will change any time soon. More money put aside for wildlife enforcement means fewer funds to fight the rebels and fewer kickbacks for the military and provincial authorities who take a cut from the black market trade. And when corruption goes all the way to the top, there is nobody left to set an example. ♣

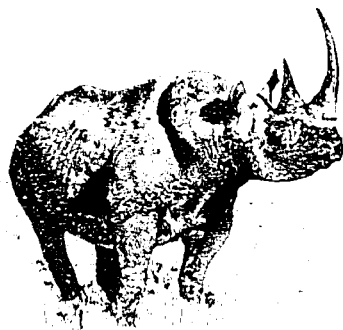


Kolkata, India  
May, 2003

*Inside one the oldest gunsmith shops in India; the shop has been in the same family for five generations. It was the first port of call when the "Great White Hunters" from England hit the shores of India.*

# SAVING THE RHINO

On a crystal clear morning in March, Chitwan National Park in southern Nepal echoed with the sound of gunfire. Less than fifty meters from a forest clearing, a great one-horned Asian rhino staggered and fell to the ground, where it lay virtually motionless until a group of men approached. The men worked quickly, checking the animal's abdomen and talking into two-way radios. The rhino was then hoisted into a wooden crate and driven off in a truck heading for the remote western border.



*Black Rhino*

Although only two species of rhinoceros presently survive, today rhinos have a long and distinguished history. Since their origin about 10 million years ago, they have been an extremely diverse group representing many different ecotypes and residing from temperate to arctic regions. Some resembled giraffes, some horses, some hippos, while others were more like modern rhinos. Now extinct rhinos were once more widespread in North America and Europe than in Africa and Asia.

This sudden invasion in Nepal's best-known national park was not the work of poachers in search of the rhino's valuable horn, but an ambitious attempt by local and international conservationists to boost the rhino population by transporting small groups of the animals to new wildlife reserves. Named simply "Operation Rhino Translocation" it represents one of the biggest hopes that this animal, hunted for its valuable and densely matted horn, can be saved.

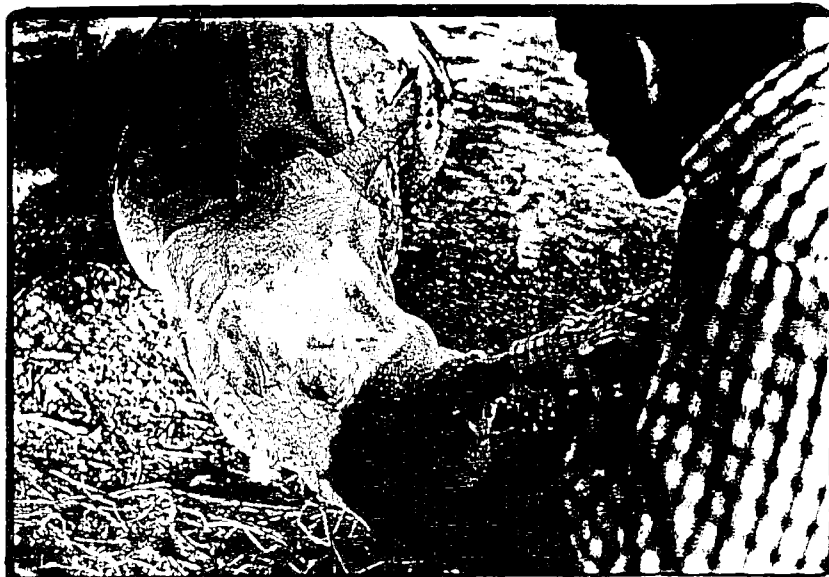
Of all the illegal forms of wildlife trade, the trafficking of rhino horn is the world's most secretive, profitable, and dangerous. Driven by the horn's extraordinary value (in some cases it's worth more than five times its weight in gold), it has long been the domain of powerful international syndicates. These ruthless operators attempt to control its supply and transport routes, much in the same way that oil and rubber barons attempted to corner their respective markets. Anyone who gets in the way is simply killed.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the war to control the lucrative rhino horn market opened up a new front. In the face of soaring demand for rhino horn to make traditional Chinese medicine and ornamental dagger handles, a number of criminal syndicates banded together. The result was the formation of the world's most powerful rhino-horn cartel.

In early 1993, a team of undercover investigators from the U.K.-based Environmental Investigation Agency set out to expose the violent network of traffickers. Their first stop was in Africa, home of the biggest rhino population in the world. Steve Galster of Wildlife in Bangkok was a member of the team. Galster, an American, has participated in countless undercover missions involving drugs, weapons, and wild animals. It was his responsibility to track the rhino horns to their ultimate destination. From the ports of Durban and Cape Town in South Africa, he trailed Galster thousands of miles over the Indian Ocean to a densely populated island off the coast of China. By

Guwahati Zoo  
India  
May, 2003

*A keeper at the  
Guwahati zoo touches  
one of the rhinos, while  
saying a small blessing.*



Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary  
Assam, India  
May, 2003

*Rangers and police stand guard over a gang of Muslim poachers as they are questioned by the media. When the police searched the female member of the gang's house they found two rhino horns under her kitchen bench. The two horns were from a female rhino and her calf which had been poached two days earlier by means of electrocution.*

the early 1990s, Taiwan had become the world's center for rhino-horn smuggling. It had a stockpile estimated to total nine tons—equivalent to 3,700 dead rhinos—with a street value of US \$50 million at the time. And the horns were openly on sale.

The trafficking routes, however, led beyond Taiwan to Guangzhou, a sprawling city of 6 million inhabitants in southern China. In the White Swan Hotel on the outskirts of town, Galster and his Taiwanese assistant Rebecca Chen, first made contact with men whose aim was to drive the rhino to extinction. "The smugglers believed that if the rhino became extinct, the price of rhino horn could easily have doubled," says Galster, who posed as a wealthy South African buyer of rhino horn. "This was a calculated attempt to corner the market using horns from one of the most valuable and endangered species on earth."

Galster learned that senior government officials were involved at every level of the operation. Diplomats from North Korea and South Korea were illegally importing the horn from South Africa to Taiwan in diplomatic pouches. Despite a blanket ban on all trade between the two countries, the consignments were then smuggled via Hong Kong to southern China. In the town of Zhiang



Along near the border with Vietnam, Chinese officials stockpiled them in three warehouses. In one warehouse, Galster and Chen used concealed cameras to film 600 rhino horns poking out of potato sacks.

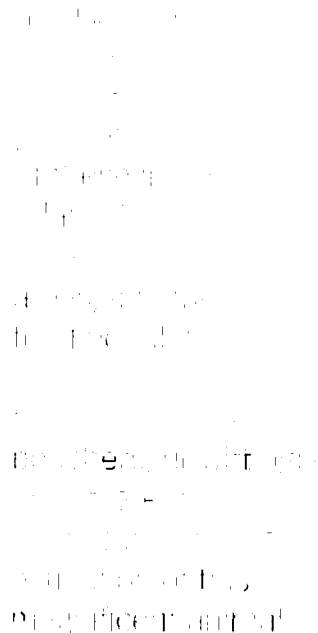
When Galster agreed to purchase 11 tons of rhino horn for cash, the Chinese sellers offered to arrange a military escort to accompany the shipment to the border with Hong Kong. From there, the horn could have been sent anywhere in the world. Instead, Galster boarded a flight to Taiwan and then to London with the undercover film concealed on his body. The footage, together with other documentary evidence, was presented to a special CITES meeting held in Brussels. At least six officials involved in the illegal operation were rounded up and sent for trial.

Several months later a surreal event occurred. As groups of eager Chinese onlookers watched spellbound, a mountain of rhino horn was burned in public. Like a funeral pyre for all the world to see.

The unprecedented undercover operation, however, may well have saved the rhino from extinction. Following the introduction of new and tougher anti-trafficking measures, populations in some countries began to recover. As of 2002, there were close to 3,000 rhinos in Asia. Meanwhile in Africa, where some of the largest massacres had taken place, the numbers of black African rhino and white African rhino are also on the rise.

Even bigger news occurred in April 2000, when scientists from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) using automatic infrared movement-triggered cameras were able to produce the first documentary evidence that the Javan rhino—the world's most endangered mammal—still existed in the wilds of Vietnam. The cameras confirmed what locals in the area had claimed for a number of years: that around seven to ten of these animals inhabited the Nam Cat Tien National Park in the country's southwest. The rediscovery of a species last seen in Vietnam in the early 1960s has set in motion frenzied efforts to pull this animal back from the brink of extinction.

Whether the rhino can survive in a world of depleted forests and fast-growing populations is likely to depend as much on continued international pressure from governments and conservationists as it is on preservation of their habitat. But there is a lesson that can be drawn from the battle to save the rhino: if the world is committed to stopping the trade in wildlife and it is prepared to use its full legal and financial muscle to do so, then it can and will be successful. *—L*



**Chitwan National Park  
Bharatpur, Nepal  
January, 2004**

*At the Bharatpur barracks, a Royal Forestry Department Officer holds a rhino poached for its horn. The stockpile of items is five years old and the value is an estimated US \$750,000.*



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